

Wrightstown Area Spirit

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Zigmunt and Sheridan tour local dairy

By Rachel Johnson
Editor

During these dark days of dairy farming, with milk prices at a record low, State Representative Ted Zigmunt and Wisconsin State Assembly Speaker Michael Sheridan made a trip to Shiloh Dairy in Brillion to talk to Greenleaf-based owners Cathy and Gordon Speirs. Accompanied by Dairy Business Association Executive Director Laurie Fischer and Capitol Consultants Representative Shawn Pfaff, the group was all business as they toured the farm and discussed the role of regulations in the dairy business. "The purpose of the visit was to see how a CAFO farm operates, and what concerns the owners of such farms have. We in the legislature, value the family farm and Mike and I wanted to know if there is anything we can do to help rectify those concerns," Zigmunt said.

The Speirs relocated their business and family to Wisconsin from Canada in 2003 after years of researching the best location in the United States to expand their third-generation dairy farm which restrictions in Canada prohibited them from doing.

Wisconsin's well-developed infrastructure was the tipping point in the decision. Everything the dairy needs is within a few miles, and not the 30 miles Gordon had to drive in Canada. For example, Gordon cited only two milk processing plants in Idaho. There are 130 in Wisconsin.

Shiloh Dairy is considered a large, family-run dairy. The Speirs milk

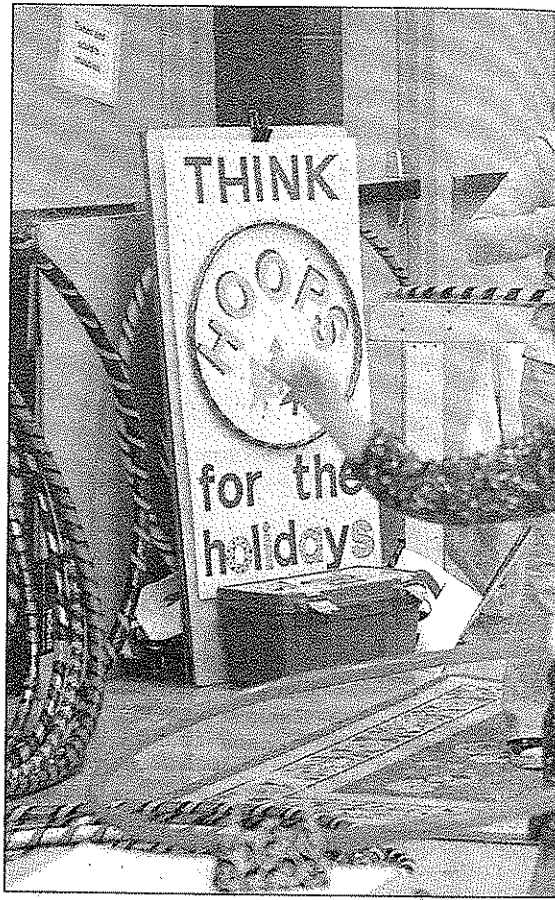
1,300 cows three times a day, producing 90 pounds of milk per cow. Cathy is a vet technician and takes care of all the calves herself. "Cathy is the best calf raiser," Fischer said.

Both the Speirs and Fischer felt strongly that all size dairy farms are needed to maintain the infrastructure. "The big farms today are not corporate giants that have said we're going to move in and said we're going to have a big farm. Most of the big farms in Wisconsin once were little farms, and they loved cows and they loved the business and they grew. And they were good at what they did, and they grew some more," Gordon said. "We're not transplanted capitalists that are trying to rape the countryside and the little farmer that's next door. We're just little farmers that got good at it. And we got better at it, and we grew and enlarged our equity and our capital and became a bigger farm. This is solely a family farm that you're on, today. The buck stops with me, or the absence of the buck stops with me."

Fortunately, for the dairy farmers there is plenty of good competition for buyers, so they are able to obtain a good price for their milk. "In Wisconsin, we actually get paid a premium from our cheese plant over the class price. So, if we keep 130 cheese guys in business all of our farmers make more in Wisconsin than they do throughout the nation," Fischer said.

"So, we want all size operators to stay here," Fischer continued. "If we

WHS craft and bake sale dra



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By Jim Pinkham

For the Wrightstown Area Spirit

Hark! Are there Ebenezers on the
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Come?

Not so, village
as a committee
last week — pres
instead as carefu
public treasury.

They hope some
may step in to rep
cons that have bee

Dairy

continued from page 1

eliminate those guys, we don't have enough milk for our cheese guys. Our cheese guys go out of business, and everybody's done."

"It's a huge trickle down," Cathy agreed.

Brown County is home to a lot of cows, but Gordon pointed out that there's still a lot of corn standing in the fields. "We're done on silage harvest," he said. "That means all the crop is in the bunker already. Any acre that still has corn standing on it that means that there's not a cow taking food off of that and that's going into a different market. It's going to leave the state; it's going to go to ethanol or some other product. As much as you think there are a lot of cows here, there's room for a lot more cows."

According to the National Agriculture Statistics Service, there are 106,000 head of livestock and 160,000 acres of cropland in Brown County. Still, there's not enough manure to go around. Instead, farmers are paying millions of dollars annually for chemical fertilizers shipped in from other countries at a high cost.

Gordon agreed. "There's still a great need for commercial fertilizer because we don't make nearly enough manure to fertilize the crops we grow. We spread our manure according to our nutrient management plan and we can't fertilize the crops that we bring in."

"People come to us asking for manure for their land and we have to turn people away and say that we have none left," Cathy said.

"I'm literally 10 million gallons oversold on manure coming into this fall."

— Gordon Speirs

Shiloh Dairy owner that they have to follow and they do a great job."

"You don't need to regulate any further," Cathy said. "We just need to work with what we already have."

The Speirs understand the importance of getting along with their neighbors and protecting the environment. "The hours spent on your manure management plan is crazy," Cathy said. "Soil sampling to the nth degree and testing manure, it's unbelievable, but it's great. Wouldn't you want to know the value of the nutrients going in so that you can plan your crops appropriately? This is all great science, as well as environmental learning."

The Speirs have installed a sand setting lane to save costs and sand. They bed all of their animals on sand. "Sand is inert. Bacteria doesn't like to grow in it. Sand is comfortable, it's soft. They can squish down into it. Plus, it provides great traction in the alley when they are moving around. Cattle with good traction are happy cattle," Gordon explained.

The cows at Shiloh Dairy were happily and very quietly munching away. There was no bellowing. The Speirs take great pride in providing

manure for the cropland in Brown County. Farmers follow detailed nutrient management plans designed to protect Wisconsin's land and water by keeping them at a level the crops need, no more according to Fischer.

"Farmers are good stewards," Fischer said. "Farmers want to do the right thing. Farmers drink the water. So, instead of an onslaught of more regulations that likely will go just to the largess and not help the rest of the state, let's find a way to just sit down at the table and get nutrient management plans in place for everybody."

Zigmunt's grandfather had a dairy farm, and Zigmunt himself came up through the ranks of rural management, and is still the village president for Francis Creek. "Ted gets it," Fischer said.

Sheridan was the wide-eyed city boy new to the business side of the dairy industry.

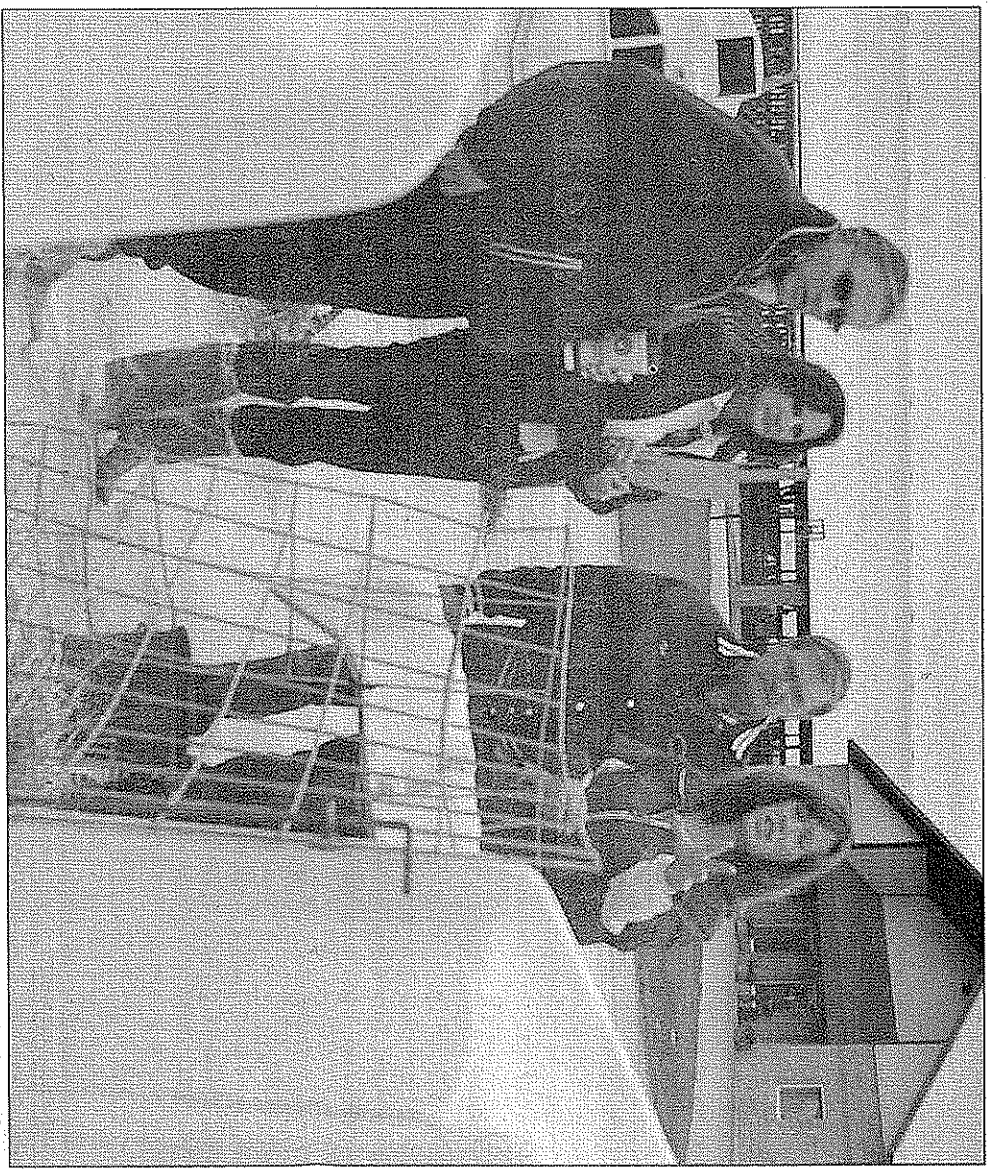
"We also have to get across the point that large farms such as the Speirs are excellent managers," Zigmunt said. "They have a lot of regulations that they have to follow and they do a great job."

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Rachel Johnson photos

Cathy Speirs explains how Shiloh Dairy cares for its calves to Wisconsin State Assembly Speaker Michael Sheridan (far left), Dairy Business Association Executive Director Laurie Fischer, and 2nd Assembly District Representative Ted Zigmunt. Speirs emphasized that routine is the key to happy cows and calves. Not even one calf moored while she spoke which, according to Speirs, is an indicator of contentedness.

already down to zero," she said. "With the regulations that are already in place, we're already down to zero. I defy anybody to tell me that I can do better than zero."

"This is the heart of the argument about how we control our manure," Pfaff said. "These guys are controlling the odor, they're controlling the discharge. They have to. It's one of those things. They're environmental stewards."

"You guys (the government) at the state level in the darkest days have really done the right thing," Pfaff said. "My generation, 20 years ago, left the farm of 50 cows because it was headed in the wrong direction. Now, people are coming back. The style of dairy farming has changed, but we've got the tenants."

The Speirs are optimistic about the dairy industry. "There is light on the horizon," Gordon said. "The markets are showing us some break even numbers for November."

"At the end of the day, I think that the good managers, the good cattlemen, the good businessmen will be the ones to come out on top. You

hate to think of it as survival of the fittest, but that's what we need. We need strong cattlemen; we need good financial managers to be running the industry. This is food production. This is not only feeding the United States, but we have the ability to feed the world," Cathy said.

"I'd rather bleed to death in four months than slowly bleed to death over the next year and a half. I think the Capitalist system will allow me to bleed to death in the next four months. If we have too much government interference, it's just going to be a slow, long painful death," Gordon said.

Zigmunt and Sheridan seemed to get a lot out of the tour and the information they received from Fischer and the Speirs. "I was also surprised by the efficiency of the operation at the Shiloh Dairy," Zigmunt said. "Cathy and Gordon should be very proud of themselves, their family and their employees. I am very happy that the two of them chose Wisconsin above other states, to start their dairy operation."

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Gordon Speirs talked about the importance of immigration to help them sustain their workforce. Forty percent of rural Wisconsin's workforce is immigrant-across the board, not just dairy. Zigmunt listened while Sheridan yielded to the temptation to pet a yearling.



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